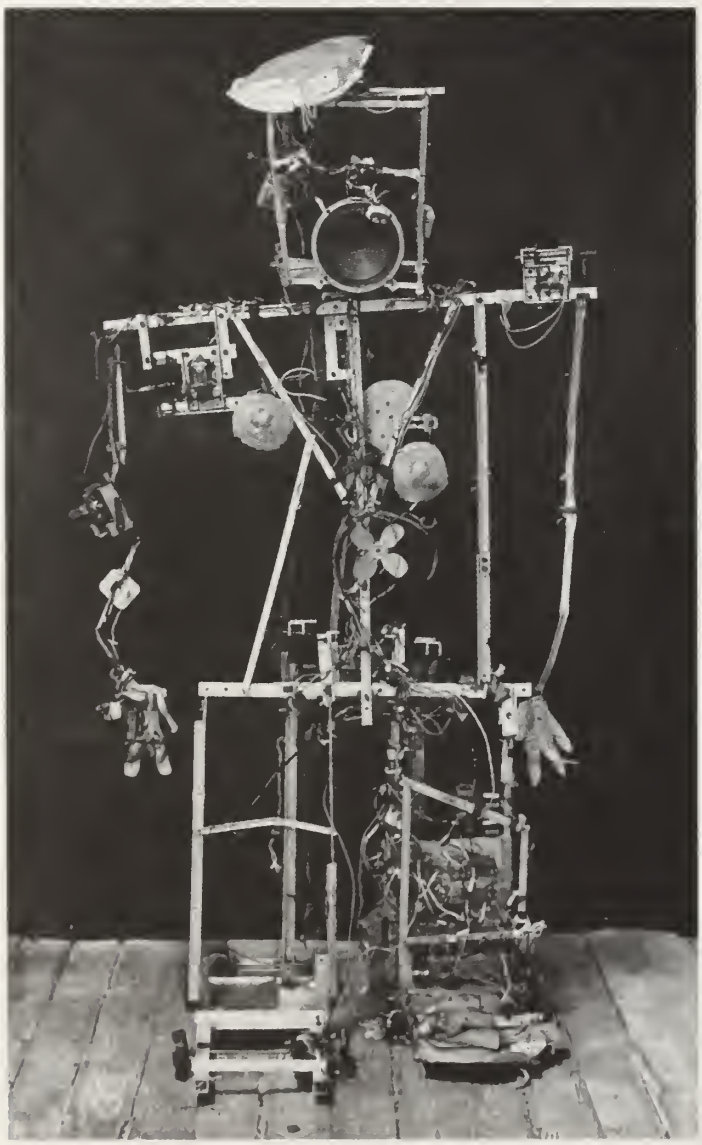
Nam June Paik

Whitney Museum of American Art, April 30–June 27, 1982

During the 1960s and 1970s, video emerged and established itself in America as a new art form. The key figure in this development has been the composer, artist, and performer Nam June Paik. An account of his career is also an account of the transformation of television and new video technologies into contemporary art.

Nam June Paik was born in Seoul, Korea, in 1932. In 1956, after graduating from the University of Tokyo with a degree in aesthetics and a thesis on Arnold Schönberg, Paik traveled to West Germany to pursue his interest in twentieth-century music. There he met John Cage, participated in Karlheinz Stockhausen's musical theater piece *Originale*, and began creating compositions and doing performances throughout Europe. In 1961 Paik met George Maciunas, founder of Fluxus, a loose, anarchic network of artists. Paik's association with Fluxus, an integral part of his aesthetic, is expressed in such early pieces of object art as *Urmusik* (1961), *Violin with String* (1961), and *Random Access* (1963), in which he manipulated and transformed found materials into noisemakers, metaphors for music, and performance objects.



Robot K-456 (1964), a twenty-channel radio-controlled robot by Nam June Paik in collaboration with Shuya Abe. Private collection, Cologne, West Germany. Photo © 1964 by Peter Moore.

In early 1963, Paik purchased thirteen second-hand television sets and used them to create his video sculptures of "prepared televisions." Later that year he included these works in his first one-man exhibition, the "Exposition of Music—Electronic Television," at Rolf Jährling's Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, which was, in fact, the first show of video art anywhere.

Paik decided to visit America in 1964 and meet with Fluxus artists such as George Maciunas, whom he had encountered in Europe. He stayed on permanently, settling in New York City and beginning an extraordinary period of creativity during which he would make a unique contribution to American art and culture. In New York Paik met Charlotte Moorman, a classical cellist by training and a noted interpreter of avant-garde music. The first of their many collaborations took place during Moorman's "Second Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival," where Paik premiered *Robot Opera*, with Moorman, and *Robot K-456* (1964), which he had brought with him from Japan. This remote-controlled robot, developed with the electronics engineer Shuya Abe, walked and talked in Paik's performance and on the streets of New York. *Magnet TV* (1965), another work that transformed video into art, was featured with other works in his first one-man exhibition in New York, at the New School for Social Research in 1965. The showing of Paik's first videotape followed, at the Café à Go-Go, a tape shot with a portable video camera he had bought that same day.

The selection of pieces in this retrospective describes the scope of Paik's accomplishment. In addition to early musical scores and sculptural objects, the exhibition includes the video sculptures *TV Cello* (1971), *TV Glasses* (1971), and *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969), created for Charlotte Moorman, which have been featured in their performances and in Paik's videotapes. The second-floor Film/Video Gallery and a major portion of the fourth floor are devoted to Paik's large video installations, which, through the positioning of televisions and video images within the exhibition space, explore their relationship to each other and to other elements. These expanded forms of video include *Video Fish* (1975–77), with live fish and televisions; *Fish Flies on Sky* (1975), where televisions hang from the gallery ceiling; *TV Garden* (1974–78), with televisions lying face-up on the gallery floor, surrounded by plants; *Moon is the Oldest TV* (1965–76) and *TV Clock* (1963–81), where sequences of television images represent the phases of the moon and the passage of time, respectively. *Imagine There Are More Stars on the Sky Than Chinese on the Earth* (1981) projects circular video images onto the gallery walls; in *Participation TV* (1963–71) abstract

Charlotte Moorman with *TV Cello* (1971) and *TV Glasses* (1971) at Galeria Bonino, New York City, November 23, 1971. Photo by Thomas Haar.

video images are activated by sound. Paik's latest work is the Paik/Baumann laser video environment, in which projected video images transform the gallery into moving video surfaces and spaces.

These large video projects expand our concept of sculpture through the introduction of transitory, electronically produced imagery into the text of the work. Thus many of these pieces incorporate Paik's videotapes—*Global Groove* (1973) is shown in the *TV Garden*, and *Lake Placid '80* can be seen in *V-yramid* (1982). These videotapes were produced on the Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer, a device developed in 1969, which introduced the electronic transformation of representational imagery and the generation of abstract forms into videotape.

Paik's art and his career have been informed by a complex network of associations and relationships with visual artists, composers, technicians, television stations, and galleries, operating within several different art movements. His wide-ranging interests in all forms of art making and in the exploration of visual and scientific ideas have shaped his aesthetic discourse, bringing multiple resources and materials into his individual performances, compositions, videotape projects, and video sculptures. In addition, Paik refashions earlier works in a process that constantly reflects on the past while thinking about the future. In the hands of Nam June Paik, video became a medium of individual creative expression, altering the conventional and standardized perception of these technologies, and revealing their potential to stimulate and challenge as new visual and conceptual art forms.

John G. Hanhardt
Curator
Film and Video

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Nam June Paik exhibition could have been made possible only by the cooperation and generosity of many institutions and individuals. The Curator wishes to extend special thanks to Shuya Abe, Bob Abrams, Shridhar Bapat, Horst Baumann, Mrs. Fernanda Bonino, Carol Brandenburg, Paul Earls, Dr. Wulf Herzogenrath, Shigeko Kubota, Andres Mannik, Peter and Barbara Moore, Charlotte Moorman, Frank Pileggi, David A. Ross, Marjan Solč, and Howard Wise. Plants for *TV Garden* were donated by Kenneth J. West Plants, Inc., New York City.

The following collectors and institutions loaned works for the exhibition: Asian Gallery, New York City; Stella Baum, Wuppertal, West Germany; Mrs. Fernanda Bonino, New York City; Herman Braun, Remscheid, West Germany; Wolfgang Hahn, Cologne, West Germany; Dr. Wulf Herzogenrath, Cologne, West Germany; Allan Kaprow, Rancho Santa Fe, California, and Vaughan Rachel, Los Angeles, California; Barbara and Peter Moore, New York City; Charlotte Moorman, New York City; Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria; Hala Pietkiewicz, Great Neck, New York; and David A. Ross, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nam June Paik's videotapes are distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.

The complex process of preparing this exhibition was the responsibility of the Film and Video Department: Callie Angell, Curatorial Assistant; Elliot Caplan, Research Assistant to the Exhibition.

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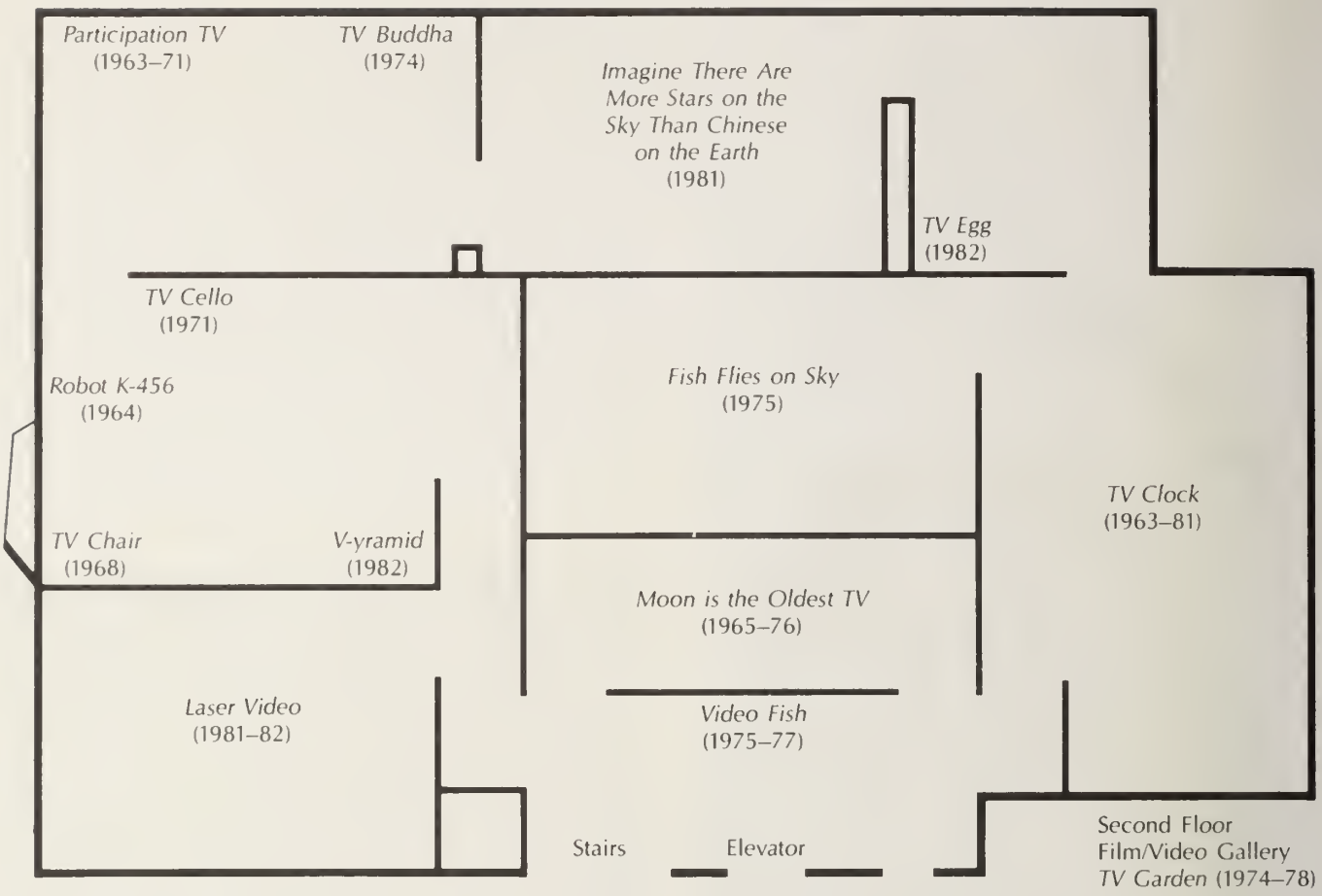
Fourth Floor



VIDEOTAPE RETROSPECTIVE

A retrospective of videotapes by Nam June Paik will be broadcast on WNET-TV/Channel 13 on Sunday evenings, immediately following "Independent Focus."

May 9 — *A Tribute to Nam June Paik: Video Portrait of a Man Who Won't Sit Still* (1982) by Kit Fitzgerald and John Sanborn, 30 minutes.

May 16 — *Allan and Allen's Complaint* (1982) by Nam June Paik and Shigeko Kubota, 30 minutes.

May 23 — *Global Groove* (1973) by Nam June Paik and John J. Godfrey, 30 minutes.

May 30 — *Merce by Merce by Paik* (1978). Part I: *Blue Studio: Five Segments* by Charles Atlas and Merce Cunningham, 30 minutes; Part II: *Merce and Marcel* by Shigeko Kubota and Nam June Paik, 30 minutes.

June 6 — *Media Shuttle: Moscow/New York* (1978) by Nam June Paik and Dimitri Devyatkin, 30 minutes.

June 13 — *Guadalcanal Requiem (Revised)* (1979) by Nam June Paik with Charlotte Moorman, 29 minutes.

June 20 — *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973) by Nam June Paik, 60 minutes.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Friday, May 21, at 6:30 P.M.

The art of Nam June Paik will be discussed by John Cage, composer; John G. Hanhardt, Curator, Film and Video, Whitney Museum of American Art; Dr. Wulf Herzogenrath, Director, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, West Germany; Pontus Hulten, Director, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California; and David A. Ross, Director, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts. For ticket information, call (212) 570-3652.

PERFORMANCES BY NAM JUNE PAIK AND CHARLOTTE MOORMAN

Wednesday, June 2, and Thursday, June 3, at 8:00 P.M.
Tickets are available at the Museum's Sales Desk.

Cover photo. Nam June Paik performing with *Violin with String* (1961–75) at the "Twelfth Annual New York Avant-Garde Festival," Floyd Bennett Field, Brooklyn, New York, September 27, 1975. Photo © 1975 by Peter Moore.